

STATE HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY OF IOWA

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

# The Annals of Iowa

---

Volume 75 | Number 3 (Summer 2016)

pps. 269-270

---

## Wisconsin Agriculture: A History

Pamela Riney-Kehrberg

*Iowa State University*

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2016 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

### Recommended Citation

Riney-Kehrberg, Pamela. "Wisconsin Agriculture: A History." *The Annals of Iowa* 75 (2016), 269-270.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12309>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](http://iowa-research-online.org)

and gophers who tried to consume plants in their fields. Drought, severe weather, and fires threatened harvests. Some children went to school in the summer, their labor easier to spare than in the autumn.

In the fall, days grew shorter and families rushed to gather their foodstuffs for the long winter that everyone knew was coming. Vegetables such as pumpkin and squash were gathered, wheat was cut, and people completed tasks, often in the company of neighbors. Quilting and shucking bees, as well as house-raising, provided much needed labor and company. Pigs were slaughtered and pork stored away. Men took surplus crops to nearby towns and cut large amounts of wood to burn to keep families warm. During winter, children went to school, and life continued at a slower pace, even as water froze in glasses on tables inside cabins. The arrival of a new spring brought a new year of work.

This brief book will be a useful addition to libraries, but *The Wisconsin Frontier* by Mark Wyman is a far more detailed survey of the topic.

*Wisconsin Agriculture: A History*, by Jerry Apps. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2015. xi, 321 pp. Illustrations (many in color), sidebars, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Pamela Riney-Kehrberg is professor of history at Iowa State University. She is the author of *The Nature of Childhood: An Environmental History of Growing Up in America since 1865* (2014) and *Childhood on the Farm: Work, Play, and Coming of Age in the Midwest* (2005).

In *Wisconsin Agriculture: A History*, Jerry Apps presents a thorough and engaging look at Wisconsin agriculture through the decades. He begins with the geology and climate of Wisconsin, moves on to Native American history, and then into nineteenth-century settlement and development of farms throughout the state. He then proceeds through the development of agriculture over time and among crops. Although dairying gets a considerable number of pages, he also deals with crops such as cranberries, tobacco, honey, mink, and “muck” crops, such as sphagnum moss. Before reading this book, I had no idea that Wisconsin was the only state in the union with a sphagnum moss industry. There are many such nuggets buried in Apps’s narrative.

This is no dry, academic text. Apps tells his story in a number of different ways. The narrative is heavily illustrated with photographs and artwork. There are plenty of facts and figures for those who want that kind of nitty-gritty detail. There are personal stories for people who want their history with a human face. Informational sidebars about various topics have been placed throughout the text, giving

readers a chance to examine interesting topics that might not otherwise have been included. Because of the importance of dairying to Wisconsin, Apps includes a fairly substantial spread on the “oleo wars” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite the ascendance of margarine after World War II, Wisconsin law requires that butter be served to all of those in state institutions, whether students, patients, or inmates. In another sidebar about World War II, there is a listing of all items rationed during the war and providing the dates during which the rationing took place. Because Apps covers so many topics, no one topic is examined in any significant depth. He has footnotes and a bibliography, however, so readers who want more can easily find the sources from which Apps drew his text.

This is a beautiful book. I suppose it could be called a “coffee table book,” because of its lavish illustrations, heavy, slick paper, and use of color, but that would not appreciate its real usefulness as a fairly encyclopedic piece of history. It is clear that Apps has put a great deal of thought and care into this book, and he has covered a wide array of topics that should engage anyone with an interest in the agricultural history of the upper Midwest. It would make a good model for similar tomes on the topic for other midwestern states. *Wisconsin Agriculture* is gorgeous, interesting, and sure to provide new information even to people who think they already know a lot about this topic. At \$34.95 for a hardcover, this is a bargain book.

*The National Joker: Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Satire*, by Todd Nathan Thompson. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015. xii, 178 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.50 hardcover.

Reviewer Mark Wahlgren Summers is professor of history at the University of Kentucky. His books include *A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction* (2009) and *The Press Gang: Newspapers and Politics, 1865–1878* (1994).

Humor: it’s no laughing matter. Visitors to the memorial in Washington, D.C., can see in Abraham Lincoln’s image the Great Emancipator and the grave man of sorrows, but it may be his fame as a homespun joke teller that has endeared him to most Americans and made them feel closer to him than to any other president. Now, in *The National Joker*, Todd Nathan Thompson lifts that aspect into the importance it deserves. Arguing that Lincoln’s yarns and quips were not just humor, but satire, he makes a compelling case for their use as a powerful rhetorical weapon on his behalf.

Lincoln’s gift for humor was already well known out west before his election. How feelingly his opponents knew it! The rising politi-